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ABSTRACT

Teachers must establish good relationships with parents if they want to have a significant impact on their students. Finding time to communicate with parents is difficult for most educators. The telephone provides a form of communication which is effective, requires minimal expenditures of time and energy, and allows certain kinds of information to be communicated well. Access to and availability of phones characterizes telephone communication in the United States. As such, phone communication can be established practically instantaneously with a parent. Telephone communications allow teachers to receive immediate feedback from parents and to engage in two-way interaction. Many adults are at ease over the phone but not with other forms of interpersonal communication. In the early part of the school year when parent-teacher relationships are beginning to develop, telephone contact reduces tension. Telephone limitations include such features as parents' expectations to hear bad news, lack of parent time to prepare, phone calls made at inconvenient times for the parent, and language barriers which hinder phone communication. Homework discussions and emotional issues are better discussed through means other than telephone conversations. (The document concludes with ten guidelines for telephone communication with parents.) (Author/DB)

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# THE TELEPHONE AND PARENT/TEACHER COMMUNICATION

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## The Telephone and Parent/Teacher Communication

An important fact continues to surface in a wide variety of educational settings: Teachers must continue to build and strengthen their relationships with parents if they want to have a significant impact on the lives of the children they teach. Most educators recognize this need, but find it difficult to set aside the time to accomplish the task. Although home visits, parent-teacher conferences, and parent meetings are extremely important and effective communication techniques, they all require a large expenditure of time and energy from teachers who are already stretched to the limit. In addition, these forms of communication are simply inadequate for sharing certain kinds of information with parents. Where, then, can the teacher turn for help? The answer is usually close at hand: the telephone.

The telephone has become a pervasive tool for communication in our society. With few exceptions, it is an essential element in the private and public lives of people in all walks of life. It makes sense, then, to use the telephone as one important tool for encouraging healthy parent-teacher interactions.

### Why Telephone?

One of the more obvious benefits of telephone calling is the ease and convenience with which it can be done. Nearly every school has at least one telephone which teachers may use before, during, or

after school hours to communicate with parents. Or, if preferred, calls can be made from the privacy and comfort of the teacher's home. In either situation chances are good that parents and teacher will make contact, since most homes have telephones.

For the busy teacher, the relatively small amount of time needed to make a telephone call is another important advantage of this type of communication. Through the use of the telephone the teacher can "make connections" with the parent in a matter of seconds. Other communication tools often consume more time and energy in just getting together than the actual interaction itself requires. Telephone communications are often much shorter in length, too, which means additional savings in that precious commodity of time.

There are other benefits associated with telephone use which are not so obvious. One such benefit is the fact that telephone communications allow the teacher to receive immediate feedback from the parent. This two-way communication allows the parent and teacher to be both the giver and receiver of information. Other communication techniques (such as newsletters) definitely have many valuable uses, but only allow information to flow in one direction at a time. For certain messages, the give and take of the telephone conversation is essential to insure clear understandings between parent and teacher.

Another important "hidden benefit" of the telephone call is that many adults (both parents and teachers) are more at ease when using this method of communication. This seems to occur for two main reasons. First, it is often easier to communicate from the known surroundings of the home or school. This situation is usually more conducive to relaxed communication due to its familiarity and comfort. Second,

many parents and teachers are more at ease when the communication is not face-to-face. Although this contact is meaningful and important in a number of situations, many parents and teachers can be more relaxed over the telephone. Particularly in the early part of the school year, when parent-teacher relationships are beginning to develop, there is often less tension when contact is made via the telephone. Even longer-standing relationships may have enhanced communications when potentially threatening non-verbal messages are avoided by using the telephone.

## Limitations of the Telephone

As with every form of communication, the telephone call also has its limitations. Teachers planning to use the telephone must be sensitive to these as well. One frequent problem centers around parent attitudes toward telephone calls from teachers. An example of this attitude is clearly outlined in the following telephone conversation. The teacher is calling to tell the parent their child has done a particularly good job of sharing toys this week in the pre-school:

Teacher: "Hello, Mrs. Nichols. This is Rebecca Frost, Jay's teacher."

Parent: "Oh! It's good to hear from you...I think. Is everything okay? Jay's not in any sort of trouble is he?"...

Unfortunately, many parents still feel that any message from the teacher must signal bad news. This is often the case with the tele-

phone since many "crisis" situations requiring immediate attention are first dealt with by making a quick telephone call. This "something is wrong" attitude must and can be overcome. By calling on a regular basis with positive messages, teachers can make the telephone a more useful communication tool for building parent-teacher relationships.

Another potential problem associated with the telephone call is that there is generally no advance warning that the call will be coming. Teachers may call at inconvenient times for the parent. During the day, a telephone call to the home may find the adult preparing a meal or putting a child down for a nap. Or a busy parent may find it very difficult to talk through the interruptions caused by the needs of young children. Lack of prior warning may also frustrate certain parents who require more time to prepare a response to the teacher's requests or comments. A telephone conversation does not provide the opportunity for reflection needed by these parents.

The telephone equipment itself can cause additional problems for the teacher. Despite major technological advances over the years, the telephone tends to distort the actual sound of the human voice and in some cases makes it difficult to understand people when they speak. Although voices vary greatly in volume, pitch, nasality, and tone, the telephone is designed to pick up only sounds in the middle range of speech. When a person's voice deviates significantly from this middle range, it is perceptibly modified by the telephone system. The result is the potential for mis-communication. When either the parent or teacher has speech difficulties, uses a non-

standard dialect, speaks English as a second language, or has hearing difficulties the telephone message could easily become distorted.

As valuable as the telephone is in communication, it must be remembered that some messages are just not effectively shared in this way. The following example of a teacher calling to explain a homework assignment helps highlight this difficulty:

Teacher: "Hello, Mrs. Hall, this is Jim Wheeler, Ken's teacher. Am I calling you at a convenient time?"

Parent: "Yes, this is fine."

Teacher: "Good. I wanted to call and explain the assignment I sent home with Ken today. Recently he's been having trouble in his math work learning to regroup, so I made up some problems for him to do at home."

Parent: "We do want him to do well in school. But could you explain what you mean by regrouping?"

Calling to discuss homework assignments is certainly a valid way to use the telephone, but explaining the concept of regrouping probably could be done more easily and effectively using another form of communication. In general, highly emotional issues and ideas that are difficult to communicate can best be handled in other ways.

## Telephone Guidelines

Using the telephone to communicate with parents can be an enjoyable and effective way to build better home-school relationships. By keeping in mind the following common-sense guidelines, teachers

can have positive experiences with the telephone:

1) Select the items to be communicated over the telephone carefully, remembering the values and drawbacks it has as a communication tool.

2) Speak clearly and distinctly to avoid potential misconceptions.

3) Be sure to ask the parent if you are calling at a convenient time. If not, agree on another time and make sure to call back then.

4) Put parents at ease early in the conversation by telling them the reason for your call.

5) Make your initial telephone contacts light, pleasant, and positive. This will do wonders in building rapport with parents.

6) Keep telephone conversations short and to the point, without appearing abrupt. Five minutes is often an adequate amount of time for a telephone call.

7) Whenever possible, include the child in positive telephone conversations so that they know what is being said.

8) Try to contact as many parents as possible during the school year for a telephone conversation. You might find that "difficult parent" quite pleasant over the telephone.

9) Show an interest in the parents themselves by calling occasionally with a word of praise or thanks. Congratulating parents on the birth of a child, a promotion or new job, or simply thanking the parent for helping in the classroom are examples of ways in which you can show parents you care about them.

10) Be creative! Come up with your own ideas for interesting messages to be communicated as well as ways of using the telephone to make life easier as a teacher.

The telephone is an effective communication tool in working with parents. It is a pleasant and easy way to build more effective working relationships between home and school. Using the telephone on a <u>regular</u> <u>basis</u> along with such techniques as home visits,

parent meetings, and parent-teacher conferences makes good sense for teachers at all levels of education. Showing parents and children that you care makes the task of teaching more manageable and at the same time increases the chances of positively influencing the lives of children and families.